

PREHYSTERIA!

What do you call a dinosaur with one eye? A Doyouthinkesaurus! Martyn Clayden takes a brief trip through prehistory with Jim Henson's monstrous muppet creations!

Now I'm sure that when I was doing my pre-history lessons at school I remember being told that dinosaurs were enormous creatures with small brains who spent half their time in the water chewing leaves and the rest of the time on land stomping on any unfortunate wildlife. Oh yes, and then the meteor landed, causing the Ice Age which wiped them out.

Not so!

In fact they were a highly-civilised, hard-working and domesticated species, both vocal and intelligent (well, in comparison with the cavemen, anyway). At least that's what the Jim Henson Creature Shop would have us believe in the popular TV puppet series, newly released on video by Disney.

The idea originated from the late Jim, creator of the mega-successful *Muppets*, and was finally completed by his son Brian, who says:

"The initial concept was thought up by my father about four years ago. It was to be a sit-com about a struggling, blue-collar family - the only difference was it was a family of dinosaurs before they became extinct!"

Hence the Sinclair family was born, using state-of-the-art puppetry. The father, Earl, is a bombastic Megalosaurus

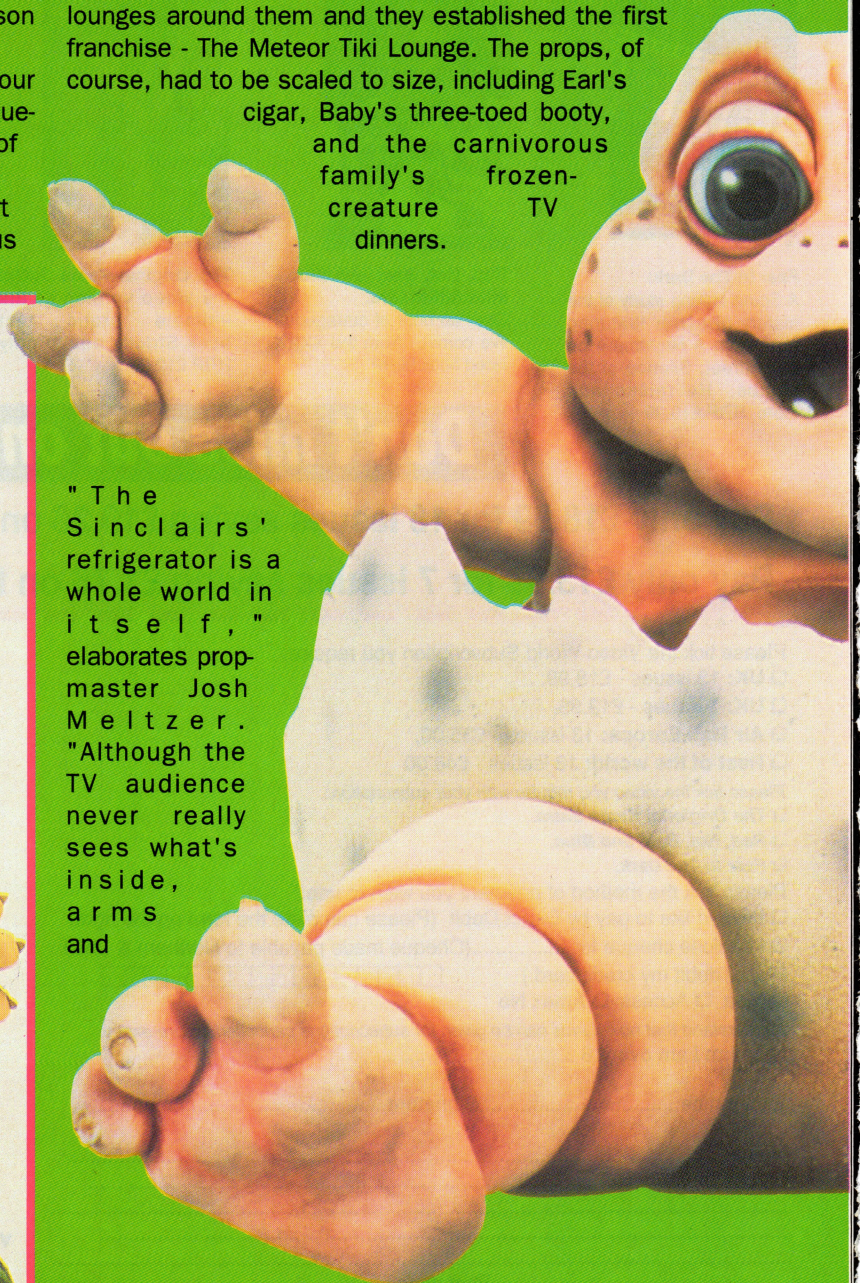
struggling with his animal instincts. A family man at heart, he nevertheless wishes he could eat his children rather than teach and discipline them. His wife Fran is a tall Allosaurus, even-tempered but cheerfully outspoken. Robbie is their 14-year-old Dudeosaurus son, determined to go against the grain and be a herbivore, and his 12-year-old sister Charlene is a two-ton material girl.

Completing the picture is Baby, who spoke at birth and hasn't shut up since. He insists on calling Earl, "Not the Momma." The set reflects the cosy environment of 60,000,003 B.C., with dinosaur tract homes, ravaged forests where Earl works for the Wesayso company as a tree feller, and even a friendly bar.

As series producer Mark Bull explains: "In this prehistoric world, meteors land everywhere. So the dinosaur built lounges around them and they established the first franchise - The Meteor Tiki Lounge. The props, of course, had to be scaled to size, including Earl's

cigar, Baby's three-toed booty, and the carnivorous family's frozen-creature TV dinners.

"The Sinclairs' refrigerator is a whole world in itself," elaborates prop-master Josh Meltzer. "Although the TV audience never really sees what's inside, arms and



legs will poke out, and frequently "dinner" will try to escape."

The techniques used to animate the various animals in the series had already been tried and tested in the Creature Workshop's other monster hit, *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. John Stephenson, the Workshop's creative supervisor, who has developed characters for *Dark Crystal*, *Greystoke*, *Return To Oz* and the TV series, *The Storyteller*, was happy to detail their methods as illustrated in the birth of the Turtles and Splinter:

"We first made fibre-glass body casts of each creature, taking great care to give them their own individual characteristics. When the casts were completed they were then resculptured in clay, including the muscle structure in the feet, calves, shoulders, neck, upper arms, and forearms - and, finally, the head and shell pieces. Moulds were then produced to cast the whole body in foam rubber latex, and then painted with its own distinctive marks and colouration."

Once the foam latex form was completed, the complex work began on mechanising the fibre-glass head: "A system was worked out that had never been used before. Our computer electronics expert

Dave Houseman developed new technology combining radio control, computerised speed, power and simplicity in operation.

Dave gave us the system we needed, which requires only one puppeteer and the facility for the Turtles to make accurate, immediate facial movements

while going from one expression to another."

The secret was the use of computers to process signals, plus a mul-

titude of ultra-light servo-motors, which enabled an operator to get a creature to blink an eye in less than, well, the blink of an eye!

This is particularly noticeable in Baby's character in *Dinosaurs*, but the technique has already become so familiar that the viewer is more aware of the sit-com than the system. Brian Henson believes that by doing that, and by exploring adult themes in a children's format he has invented something that his father would be truly proud of:

"My dad envisioned *Dinosaurs* as a series that would capture a wide-ranging audience because of its appealing, non-human stars, coupled with hard-edged sit-com humour. That's what we've all been working so hard to produce."

Let there be no mistake - the disturbing message here is light years from the affable *Muppets*, asserts producer Michael Jacobs:

"These evolved dinosaurs relate to cavemen as we do to cows. They point them out when they pass them in cars, but wouldn't invite one out to dinner. Dinosaur had very pressing issues in their day, and they handled them in very much the same manner as we handle them today. And they went extinct. maybe the audience will note this and draw some conclusions..."

Party on, diplodocus!

